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ABSTRACT

While the concept of choice is not new to families able to take advantage of the available options, the idea of giving parents nearly total freedom in selecting their children's public school is new. Proponents of choice claim it results in higher test scores, fewer dropouts, and more involved parents. Critics maintain that there is no proof of school improvement, that there is danger of resegregation, and that the socioeconomic gap will widen. Components critical to an effective school choice program include high quality parent information, guidelines for racial balance, and provisions for transportation. Brief summaries of regional action and agendas concerning parental choice from seven states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin) as well as guest commentaries from the education department heads of Iowa and Minnesota are included. A list of 22 references and resources is also provided. (EJS)

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A national perspective

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EA

Choice: Implementation Issues

A national perspective

by Marianne Kroeger, NCREL

Public school choice is being called a lot of things. The concept of choice is not new, having been available on a limited basis to those families able to live in or move to a desirable school district, send their children to private schools, or negotiate for interdistrict transfers. Magnet and alternative schools have provided another option. Still another choice is the one made by 25 to 50 percent of students nationwide to stop attending any school.

But the idea of giving parents nearly total freedom in selecting their children's public schools is new. Whatever else it may be, choice is hot, choice is controversial, and a number of states are keeping a close watch on Minnesota where choice activity began in 1985. Now, more than 20 states are considering or already have passed legislation to expand public school choice (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 1989).

Public school choice can take many forms. A program of choice can be available within school districts or across district boundaries; it can include some schools within a district or all schools. Choice can provide a "second chance" for students who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings; it can provide postsecondary enrollment options permitting students to be enrolled part-time at both their high school and a postsecondary institution or even full-time at a postsecondary facility (ECS, 1989).

Proponents say choice should be considered only a part of a total school improvement effort; opponents charge it's a politically expedient move to force consolidation. Those in favor of choice claim it results in higher test scores, fewer dropouts, more involved and satis-

fied parents. Critics maintain that there is no proof of school improvement; there is danger of resegregation; and the gap between the affluent and the poor will only widen.

Raywid says three beliefs form the pillars of the choice idea: 1) no one best school exists for everyone; 2) deliberate school diversification is important to accommodating all students and enabling them to succeed; and 3) students will accomplish more and perform better in learning environments they have chosen than in those to which they simply have been assigned (in Nathan, 1989).

Joe Nathan, senior fellow at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, believes carefully controlled competition can stimulate the education profession. Addressing the Illinois State Board of Education on February 16, 1989, Nathan outlined the following components critical to an effective public school choice program:

- High quality parent information to enable them to make informed choices;
- Opportunities for teachers to help create distinctive programs;
- Guidelines for dealing with racial balance;
- Admission standards (Nathan cautions against creating a quasi-private/public school that permits picking and choosing among applicants);
- Admission process (Nathan warns that a first-come, first-served process does not promote equity);
- Provisions for transportation; and
- Continuing observation and redesign.

Critics of choice plans include the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Responding in the May 31 issue of *Leadership News* to U.S. Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos' support for choice, AASA Executive Director Richard Miller said, "The secretary's approach would do the least for those who have the least." The article further stated that in March, AASA's Delegate Assembly rejected a proposed change to the association's resolutions that would have encouraged school choice within the restrictions of school board policies and state and federal laws.

Designs for Change, a Chicago-based group, analyzed choice program implementation in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston in a two-year research study. Donald Moore, the group's executive director, was a participant in a recent national invitational conference in Minnesota on choice. At that conference, he reported that in the school systems studied, choice became a new method of sorting students. He said students considered most at risk of school failure had very limited opportunity to participate in popular options high schools and programs and were disproportionately concentrated in schools where fellow students were minority, low-income, and had a variety of learning problems.

From ensuring educational equity, to managing funding and transportation systems, to getting information out to the communities, decisionmakers have much to consider regarding public school choice. The implications and ramifications of choice programs are many, yet policymakers really have only one initial issue to address: will a choice program help the overall process of improving their schools? ■

Policy Briefs
are reports on
the status of
current issues in
education from
a national per-
spective, de-
scriptions of
actions and
agendas in the
NCREL region,
commentaries
by experts from
their particular
point of view,
and resources
for further
information.

Regional Action & Agendas

Illinois

Establishment of policy on choice is an objective of the Illinois State Board of Education. A staff study is underway, to be complete in December, 1989. The Illinois Association of School Boards has also formed a choice committee, conducting its own study and survey of LEAs. School administrators' interest is increasing, as they request presentations on the topic by State Board staff. Funding and support are not yet identified.

Legislation

Several bills were introduced this session, including a "voucher" plan providing approximately \$50 per student, a post-secondary options plan requiring agreements between LEAs and community colleges, and a new requirement for the State Board of Education to recommend choice plans to the General Assembly by March, 1990. None of these bills passed the house of origin.

Future

Background materials are to be distributed to LEAs in the next few weeks, and consultation with districts will take place in a series of meetings around the state, all as part of the Board's policy study. The preliminary report will be drafted this fall to meet the January, 1990 deadline.

Indiana

Current state law allows high school junior and seniors to enroll in university courses on a full- or part-time basis and to receive both high school and college credit. Local school corporations decide whether to accept the credit toward graduation. No state funding for the students is included. Staff of the Department of Education are following choice legislation and programs in other states.

Legislation

No legislation regarding choice was introduced in the 1989 legislative session.

Future

Staff of the Department of Education will continue to follow programs in other states.

Iowa

The Department of Education is currently in the process of writing rules to implement new open enrollment legislation in Iowa. Open enrollment will allow students to enroll in any public school district in the state. The state has had postsecondary enrollment options for eleventh and twelfth graders in place for two years.

Legislation

While the open enrollment law took effect March 10, 1989, the transfer of students under its provision does not take full effect until the 1990-91 school year. The legislation addresses the process by which parents must request such a transfer, the parameters to be used by school districts in granting or denying requests, financial provisions, transportation, athletic eligibility, and special education as they relate to open enrollment.

Future

The rules for implementing this legislation will be completed, and further study will take place on needed legislative modification.

Michigan

The State Board of Education has adopted as part of its goals a direction to the Legislature and the Governor to find a "Family Options" plan. Such a plan should address transportation for poor children, outreach for the economically disadvantaged and be consistent with a long-range school improvement process. Teacher transfers and changes in school population figures should also be addressed.

Legislation

The Senate and House each introduced legislation relative to schools of choice. The Senate passed their version on May 8, 1989.

Future

It is expected that some monies will be set aside beginning October, 1989 for pilot projects or to assist school districts that choose to participate in choice plans.

Minnesota

Minnesota has legislated, in the past five years, six programs which allow learners choice over where they will receive their public education, if their choice does not negatively affect racial balance. The serving districts receive the general education funding and provide transportation within their boundaries.

Legislation

The K-12 Enrollment Options has been amended to require parents and learners to discuss reasons for moving with home school staff and state reasons on their applications. Once accepted, the student is obligated to attend the following school year. Students entering or leaving desegregated districts can apply at any time and attend whenever the district determines. Students need not apply each year to remain in the non-resident district. Area Learning Centers will be under 12-month funding enabling them to collect funds beyond the school year. Children of minor parents will be able to ride the bus with their parents to day care, then parents will be taken to school.

Future

Refinements in the laws will be enacted as are warranted and as the programs mature.

Ohio

In late 1988 and early 1989, the State Board of Education, the Ohio Education 2000 Commission (Blue-Ribbon study panel appointed by the Governor), and the Gillmor Commission (a legislative study group), all submitted recommendations to the Ohio General Assembly calling for legislative action that would establish guidelines and provide some funding for a Minnesota-style open-enrollment plan. Recommendations also included allowing high school students to enroll in college courses for dual credit.

A group of Ohio education leaders participating in a retreat sponsored by the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation last fall recommended that choice programs:

1) should be implemented experimentally;

Guest Commentary

2) should take into account factors such as athletics and parents' commitment to the community; and 3) should be compared with other goals — such as racial balance and financial equity — with which it might conflict. This group also recommended that the Ohio Department of Education appoint a task force to make specific recommendations for choice proposals.

Legislation

The Ohio Senate has developed an education reform package, Senate Bill 146, that would require each district to adopt an open-enrollment policy for the district. This policy would either describe the district's conditions for open enrollment, or would prohibit enrollment of students from adjacent districts. The bill would also establish a postsecondary enrollment-options plan under which eleventh and twelfth grade students could enroll in college courses.

Future

The future is uncertain.

Wisconsin

The governor has a high degree of interest in the topic of parent's choice. An initial proposal of the governor has been rejected by the educational community with the exception of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. The proposal would be funded from existing general state aids. Parents would be responsible for providing student transportation. The program would pertain only to public schools except in Milwaukee where up to 1,000 pupils could choose to attend a private school.

Legislation

There is no existing legislation in Wisconsin. It is expected that a postsecondary options program for the eleventh and twelfth grades may be developed in the legislature. Funding would likely be drawn from existing state aid funds.

Future

The future is uncertain.

Because of the interest in this topic, guest commentaries are featured by two Chief State School Officers in the NCREL region who have experience in the development of choice programs. Their experiences and perspectives may assist others who are exploring the issue.

by William Lepley, Director of the Iowa Department of Education

On March 9, 1989, Governor Terry E. Branstad signed open enrollment legislation for the state of Iowa giving parents/guardians "choice" in the selection of the public school district they wish to have their children attend. With this action, Iowa is facing a change in its educational system unparalleled in the history of the state.

As Director of the Department of Education, I have strongly supported the concept of parent choice in public education, and I will continue to do so. Research on existing choice programs indicates that they improve parent participation in the schools, empower teachers as academic leaders, shift greater decisionmaking to smaller administrative units, and produce encouragement for dropouts to return to school. They also create a revitalization and enthusiasm among many teachers involved in the programs. I am confident that parent choice in Iowa will result in greater effectiveness, efficiency, creativity, and accountability in our schools.

The following points cover the major provisions of the Iowa open enrollment legislation.

For the 1989-1990 School Year:

- Parents/guardians must describe a reason for enrolling in another district that does not exist in the district of residence.
- During the 1990-1991 school year, districts may limit the number of students who transfer out to 5 percent of the district's previous year's certified enrollment. During the 1991-1992 school year the transfers may be limited to 10 percent of previous year's certified enrollment.
- Receiving districts must accept students unless they have insufficient classroom space; all districts must adopt a policy defining "insufficient classroom space."
- A request for transfer may be refused if the enrollment or release of a student would adversely affect a district's desegregation plan.
- Generally, students in grades 9-12 who transfer will not be eligible for interscholastic athletics for the first year, with a few exceptions.
- The district of residence is required to pay to the receiving district an amount equal to the lower per-pupil cost of the two districts.
- Special education students may transfer if the receiving district has an appropriate program and if rules governing maximum class size would not be exceeded. The district of residence pays the actual cost incurred.
- Parents/guardians, in general, must transport students at their cost to a point on a regular bus route of the receiving district.
- Districts subject to voluntary or court-ordered desegregation plans may delay participation until the 1991-1992 school year in order to develop implementation policies.

continued on next page

Guest Commentary

by Ruth Randall, Commissioner of Education
Minnesota Department of Education

continued from previous page

The State Board and Department of Education have specific responsibilities under the Act. The State Board must adopt rules as needed for the implementation of the legislation. Also, parents/guardians may appeal a local board decision concerning open enrollment to the State Board. The Department of Education must conduct a three-year study of the implementation and report annually to the general assembly through 1993.

I view open enrollment as a school improvement strategy. The concept of parent choice introduces competition into public education that can only result in improvements that state mandates will never achieve. Parent choice eliminates the monopoly of the district of residency, and it gives local school boards the challenge, and more important the opportunity, to provide high quality programs. The goal of choice is not only to allow students to transfer to another district to find a program better suited to their needs, but also to induce districts and schools to improve education for the many students who choose not to move.

We face many challenges in the next several months in implementing open enrollment in Iowa. Such a change needs a phase-in period so that it is evolutionary, not revolutionary. Parents need to be informed. Local boards and the State Board need to adopt policies and implement rules. Appeal provisions and processes need to be established. Questions need to be answered, particularly regarding safeguards in the areas of racial balance, extracurricular athletics, transportation, availability of classroom space and staff, and application processes and restrictions.

I am firmly convinced that the majority of school districts in Iowa accept and can meet the challenge of parent choice. For those few districts that can't accept or meet the challenge, I think the outcome is clear. ■

A very important factor of the choice programs in Minnesota is that they are controlled to operate on public school principles: 1) they support maintaining racial balance, 2) they do not allow districts to pick and choose which learners are accepted, but must accept or not accept students based only on space available, 3) they ensure the best possible education must be available to ALL students regardless of economic status, racial or ethnic background, gender, academic ability, or behavior problems.

In Minnesota we believe that when consumers of education have a choice, districts are challenged to provide the best possible educational programs. It is especially critical that we seek ways to provide higher quality education for those students who are at risk of failure because of the family or social situation in which they live. We can no longer afford to allow schools to fail to meet the needs of these students. It is imperative that parents of all backgrounds have quality information, in a variety of ways, and assistance in making informed choices about their children's education.

Choice alone is not the answer to improving schools. Minnesota has several other state initiatives operating simultaneously to assist districts in improving their educational offerings. These include: 1) defining outcomes for student learning, 2) initiating a system of student, district, and state accountability as part of the learner outcome development, 3) removing mandates in order to empower educators to diversify and improve the learning/teaching process and methods, 4) providing increased staff development opportunities, a crucial step in the change process, and 4) providing technical assistance with organizational planning and financial management.

It is important to remember that parental choice means making a commitment to a school. This commitment can be choosing to keep the child in his/her present school or enrolling the child elsewhere. The success of these reforms will not be in the numbers moving, but in the numbers choosing and receiving the education that has each student reach his/her highest potential.

States have been endeavoring to find ways to improve education ever since national reports have criticized the quality of education in this country. Many approaches have been at-

tempted. One of the initiatives which has captured national attention is parental choice.

Choice is not a new idea. Choice has been available to families who have money, who persist in their demands for changes to meet their children's needs, who choose to move their residence, or who allow their children to drop out of school. Various school districts around the country have provided parents with choice within districts. Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, have had parental choice as a means to desegregate the schools for over ten years. What made news was Minnesota establishing consumer choice on a statewide basis.

Minnesota has a broad range of enrollment options for families. The Postsecondary Enrollment Options allows eleventh and twelfth graders to attend a college, university, or technical college, full- or part-time, for high school credit at state expense. High School Graduation Incentives allows students at risk of dropping out or who have dropped out of school to attend a different traditional high school, an approved alternative program, an Area Learning Center, or a postsecondary institution to obtain their diplomas. Area Learning Centers were created to provide a year-round, individualized program for at-risk and adult learners, offering academic and basic skill classes, vocational and trade courses, monitored work experience and transitional services. Diploma Opportunities for Adults Aged 21 and Over encourages those 21 and over to complete their last two years of high school at no cost to them. Minnesota Schools, Human Services, and Aid to Dependent Children are required by law to cooperate to insure that minor parents and pregnant minors complete their education. These targeted options are part of an effort to have 96 percent of Minnesota's students receiving high school diplomas by 1996.

The option which has received the most media coverage has been the K-12 Enrollment Option (better known as open enrollment) which allows kindergarteners through twelfth graders to apply to enroll in a public school or program in any district. Students from low-income families receive transportation from their home. Other

References & Resources

References

parents are responsible for transporting their children to the border of the nonresident district. State revenue follows the student to the new district. This option is based on the belief that children learn in different ways and any given school will serve some children better than others.

Parents and students benefit in several ways from examining the various educational programs available to them as well as the needs and interests of their children before selecting a school. They are more aware of what schools are offering in academics and extracurricular activities, the quality of teaching, the learning/teaching environment, and attitudes of teachers and students. They are encouraged to become more aware of how their children learn and under what conditions they learn best, and how their special interests can be enriched.

Those who have the opportunity to choose tend to be more involved in their children's education, which is a benefit to the students and the schools. School districts can build on this interest by involving parents in meaningful ways in the decisionmaking in the schools and district. There is already evidence that school districts in Minnesota are seeking greater parent involvement on district advisory committees and school councils. Increasingly administrators are showing more sensitivity to the needs of individual students and are beginning to be more flexible in the way they address district and consumer needs. ■

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State Resources

Illinois

Please contact Jon X. Healy for available resources.

Indiana

Please contact Carol D'Amico for available resources.

Iowa

Please contact David Bechtel for available resources.

Michigan

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Minnesota

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Enrollment Options Brochure (MDE)

How to Select a School for Your Child: A Family Guide (MDE)

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Ohio

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Wisconsin

To obtain information related to the current legislative proposal and related budget and policy documents, contact Steve Dold.

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